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Testimony
FCC Hearing, Portland
June 28, 2007

Testimony Federal Communications Commission
Office of the Secretary

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NOTE: These remarks are an extension of the oral testimony I presented at the FCC hearing in Portland, Maine on June 28, 2007.

My name is Alan Frankel, and I came from Framingham, Massachusetts today to testify about why localism and diversity are life-or-death matters.

But before I begin, I want to thank the commissioners for offering the public a chance to provide their input. I especially thank Commissioners Copps and Adelstein, not just for being here, but for doing their best to prevent the disaster that almost ensued in 2003, when a majority of the FCC under then-chairman Powell voted to further roll back the media ownership rules that have been undergoing erosion for decades. Fortunately, the public and Congress were so irate that a bipartisan group of legislators passed a law undoing the damage. I want the commissioners to know that their efforts were noticed.

Now back to localism and diversity, life and death.

In January 2002, a train derailed in Minot, North Dakota, spilling its load of anhydrous ammonia. As fumes filled the city, a train operator called 911 so the city's inhabitants could be warned to stay indoors and close the windows. But there was a problem. All six radio stations in this city were owned by the same company, Clear Channel, which ran them remotely. So no one could get a lifesaving emergency announcement out to the people. One person died, and hundreds were injured or hospitalized. That train wreck should wake us up and prepare us for emergencies. September 11, 2001 prompted changes in homeland security. But what does it mean if a town like Minot can't protect itself against a chemical spill?

There are other kinds of train wrecks, such as the war in Iraq. Now, many people at the time thought it was a bad idea to start a war against a country that COULDN'T have attacked us in order to get back at a group that HAD. Or that if we WERE going to go in, we needed enough troops. But they couldn't get on the air. Clear Channel was busy mounting pro-war rallies and censoring opponents, as were the other media.

Now this evening, I've seen an unending parade of Maine broadcasters march up to the microphone and tell us how, even though many of their bosses are not local, they take localism very seriously. They live here, as one after another has pointed out (and one even added that her infant daughter lives here, too). They bravely covered the ice storm of 1998, and they generously support local charities. In fact, they've even managed to persuade members of those charities to testify here.

A handful of people testifying in that vein might be persuasive. But by the time you have a solid column of twenty broadcasters in a row offering identical testimony, it begins to have the opposite effect. It's like a microcosm of our current TV and radio, when you turn the dial, but nothing changes. You have to ask yourself questions. Isn't there something strange about an official from a public library coming to an FCC hearing on localism to sing the praises of the TV station that acts as the library's patron? Or to have a woman from the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital attempt to tug the audience's heartstrings with the tale of a nine-year-old cancer patient who is grateful to the local broadcasters for their beneficence? Isn't it chilling for a nonprofit to beg for favors from a media oligopoly while ignoring the societal ills that force public libraries and hospitals to scrounge for money in the first place?

Even if Maine was better served by its broadcasters during an ice storm nine years ago (predating a hefty amount of media consolidation, by the way) than Minot was five years ago, they have done nothing to show us that they'd do anything to help this country avoid the Iraq train wreck that took the lives of soldiers from their community.

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What do I want the FCC to do? That's pretty simple. No need to come up with brand-new policies. It just needs to enforce the ones it's already supposed to enforce, and in fact did enforce, not so long ago.

For instance, the license review process can't continue to be a rubber-stamp process conducted only once every eight years. It needs some teeth and public input, and it needs to be performed every three years.

And we need to make sure that a lesson was learned in 2003, when the public told Congress loud and clear that it didn't want loosening of the media ownership rules, and a bipartisan group of legislators wrote this into law.

Finally, we need to make sure that when the FCC uncovers threats to localism, the chairman cannot bury the findings simply because he finds them inconvenient.

I want to close by paraphrasing Commissioner Copps from 2004: we have enough studies, we have enough comments. Now we need action.

Thank you very much.